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ABSTRACT

There is little theory of research concerning the impact of father absence on females. The present study compared father-absent and father-present preadolescent girls on the basis of selected measures of peer relationships, dating practices, source of sex information, family and peer relationships, and sexual experience. The sample consisted of 95 eighth-grade girls attending home economics classes in a junior high school in a low socioeconomic neighborhood within a large metropolitan area. The "Father-Present" group consisted of 23 blacks and 19 Caucasians. The results suggest that in ghetto environments, father-absent girls may be exposed to and cognitively oriented towards sexually provocative and promiscuous experiences at an early age. The father, in the ghetto environment, may have an important role in the development of sex-related attitudes, values, and knowledge of young adolescent girls. (Author/JM)

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Impact of Father Absence on Heterosexual Behaviors and Social Development of Preadolescent Girls in a Ghetto Environment[1]

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Although the effects of father absence on males have been studied rather extensively, there is little theory or research concerning the impact of father absence on females. Since father absence is equally common among both sexes, it is important to consider its potential effects on females as well as males.

For males, father absence presumably results in loss of an object for sex-appropriate identification and loss of a sex-appropriate role model. For females, conversely, the mother generally remains as an appropriate sex-role model and object of identification, even when the father is absent.

Father absence, nevertheless, may have significant effects on females. Without the father's authoritative influence, parental control in general may be diminished. Moreover, lacking father figures, girls may have insufficient opportunities to develop close personal relationships with mature members of the opposite sex, and they may lack opportunities to observe family interaction between parents. Thus, father absence could affect development of various heterosexual attitudes and behaviors, e.g., the quality of opposite-sex relationships, concepts of masculine and feminine roles, sexual values and controls, etc.

In an initial effort to explore some of the possible effects of father absence on females, the present study compared father-absent and father-present preadolescent girls on the basis of selected measures of peer relationships, dating practices, and sources of sex information. In addition, the two groups of girls were compared on the basis of an associative measure of concepts relating to family members, male and female peers, popularity and unpopularity, sex, and several related issues. The study focused on girls living in a ghetto environment, where father absence occurs with relatively high frequency

Method

The sample consisted of 95 eigth-grade girls attending home economics classes in a junior high school in a low socioeconomic neighborhood within a large metropolitan area. The Father Present (FP) group consisted of 18 Negroes

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[1]This paper is based on data collected for a master's thesis submitted to the University of Wisconsin (Vangen, 1968).

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and 35 Caucasians, and the Father-Absent (FA) group consisted of 23 Negroes and 19 Caucasians.

Two instruments were employed in the study. The first was a questionnaire comprised of 22 items concerning parental relationships, peer relationships, dating behaviors, and sources of heterosexual information. Certain of the questionnaire items are delineated in the results section; a copy of the questionnaire is presented in Vangen (1968).

The second instrument was based on a modified word association technique developed by Nelsen and Rosenbaum (1971). The technique involved eliciting slang expressions in response to selected stimulus topics. The Ss were asked to list slang terms and expressions used when talking about each of the following stimulus topics. Family Members, a Home, Girls, Boys, a Friend, a Popular Person an Unpopular Person, a Successful Person, an Unsuccessful Person, a Negro, a White (Caucasian), an Attractive Person, an Ugly Person, or Sex and Sexual Expression. The stimulus topics were presented in booklet form in random order. The response interval for each topic was 2 minutes.

The instruments were administered during regular class periods. The questionnaire was administered first, followed by the slang association instrument. The respondents remained anonymous in that names were not recorded on the instruments. Additional details concerning the instruments and procedures may be obtained from Vangen (1968).

Results

The responses of the Ss to the questionnaire items were analyzed with $\underline{X}^2$ tests. Seven contingency tables were examined for the purposes of this study. The analyses indicated that there were small, nonsignificant difference between the FA and FP groups on the following measures: number of close girl friends and girl acquaintances; number of close boy friends and boy acquaintances: age of boys dated: number (variety) of boys dated: and primary sources of sex information, i.e., books, school, family, or peers. Nearly half of the Ss in both groups reported that they had dated, i.e., 18 (43%) of the FA group and 23 (43%) of the FP group. Among the FA girls who had dated, 66% reported they began dating before 13 years of age, 33 % after 13 years. Within the FP group, only 30% reported dating before age 13; 70% after 13 ($X^2 = 3.97$, $p<.05$). Within the FA group, 45% reported they dated one to three time per month: 55% dated at least once a week. Within the FP group, 72% reported they dated one to three times a month: 28%, at least one a week ($X^2 = 3.26$, $p<.10$). Thus, the analyses indicated that similar proportions of the FA and FP groups had begun dating by the time they reached eighth grade, but there were tendencies for the FA girls to have begun dating at an earlier age and to date more frequently in comparsion with the FP group.

The slang responses of the Ss to the 14 stimulus topics were analyzed with a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) of word frequency, computed with a program for nonorthogonal multivariate designs. The independent variables were father absence-father presence (two levels) and race (two levels): the 14 dependent variables were comprised of the slang response frequencies for the 14 stimulus topics.

The multivariate Fs were highly significant for the comparisons involving FA-FP ($F = 5.8$, $df = 14/78$, $p < .001$) and race ($F = 3.9$, $df = 14/78$, $p < .001$), but the FA-FP X Race interaction was not significant ($F = 1.2$, $df = 14/78$, $p = .27$). Univariate F tests indicated that the Negro Ss emitted significantly more terms for the topics White (Caucasian) and Negro; they emitted significantly fewer terms for Sex and Sexual Expression. The racial comparisons were of secondary interest and are not considered further in this report, except in relation to certain pertinent analyses concerning father-absence.

Comparisons of the number of slang responses to each topic for the FA and FP groups are presented in Table 1. The analyses indicated that the FP group emitted more terms in response to Family Members, whereas the FA group produced more terms in response to Sex. The tendency for FA Ss to emit more slang expressions relating to sex was slightly greater among Caucasians ($M = 6.7$ for the FA group vs. $M = 1.4$ for the FP group) than among Negroes ($M = 4.2$ for the FA group vs. $M = 1.4$ for the FP group), but the differences between the FA and FP groups were substantial for both races.

Certain slang responses to the topics Family Members and Sex and Sexual Expression occurred rather frequently, and consideration of these expressions may provide some additional insights concerning the influence of father absence. The most frequent responses and the respective associative frequencies (percentage of Ss in the group emitting the responses) for the FA group in response to Sex were as follows: "pro" (57%), "get down" (52%), "fuck" (40%), "whore" (33%), "hole" (29%), "pimp" (29%), "stud" (29%), and "JP" (26%). For the FP group the most frequent responses to Sex were "get down" (11%) and "fucking" (9%). No other term for the topic was given by more than 5% of the FP group.

For the FA group the most frequent responses to Family were "slaves" (17%), "old lady" (10%), "big ethyl" (10%), and "sad" (10%). For the FP group, the frequent responses to Family were "dinks" (32%), "big ethyl" (25%), "brats" (25%), "clods" (23%), "creeps" (23%), and "funky" (17%). Among other terms with moderate frequencies were "sad" (13%), "old man" (11%), and "old lady" (9%). "Slave" did not occur among FP Ss.

Although the FA and FP groups did not differ significantly in the number of responses to the topic Boys, there did appear to be some differences in the forms of responses. For the FA group the most frequent responses were "pimp" (52%), "stud" (31%), "sucker" (16%), and "stone fox" (14%). For the FP group the most frequent responses to Boys were "fox" (21%), "dinks" (15%), "cool" (13%), "creeps" (11%), "fine" (11%), and "pimp" (11%).

Discussion

The study involved comparisons of father-absent and father-present girls to explore possible consequences of father absence on social development. Questionnaire measures of friendship patterns, sources of sex information, and dating practices did not reveal significant differences between the groups, except to suggest that the FA girls who dated had begun dating at an early age and generally dated more frequently than the FP girls.

TABLE 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Slang Response Frequency
For Father-Absent and Father-Present Girls

Stimulus	Father-Absent		Father-Present		F
Topic	M	SD	M	SD	1 and 91 df
BOYS	3.9	2.7	3.7	6.1	0.011
WHITE	2.4	2.2	2.8	3.2	0.001
UGLY	2.5	2.0	3.2	4.8	0.939
HOME	1.4	1.9	3.2	4.4	2.840
GIRLS	3.1	1.8	4.5	8.8	0.676
UNPOPULAR	1.9	1.7	2.4	6.3	1.239
FRIEND	2.4	1.9	2.0	2.1	0.695
SEX	5.4	3.7	1.4	1.8	45.754***
SUCCESSFUL	1.5	1.9	1.9	2.2	0.754
ATTRACTIVE	2.8	1.8	2.6	8.1	0.035
UNSUCCESSFUL	1.6	1.4	2.2	3.4	0.411
FAMILY	1.7	1.9	5.2	6.3	9.458**
NEGRO	3.5	2.7	3.3	3.2	0.730
POPULAR	2.1	2.2	2.7	3.7	1.141

** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$

The findings on the slang association measure that FA girls emitted considerably more associative responses to the topic concerning sex suggests that the girls were quite knowledgeable and expressive with regard to sexual matters. Indeed, the fact that many of the responses referred to prostitution, promiscuity, and intercourse suggests that the girls have been living in a sexually provocative and uninhibited environment. Additionally, considered along with the results concerning dating age and dating frequency, the implication is that one significant effect of father absence may involve reduced parental restrictiveness and control over the girls' dating and sexual behaviors.

A related implication of the findings from the slang association measure concerns the FA girls' conceptions of boys. The results suggest that the FA girls may respond to males with covert sexual associations and connotations. For example, the most frequent responses of these girls to the topic Boys were "pimp" and "stud," whereas these responses were relatively infrequent among the FP girls.

Another implication of the results with the slang association measure concerns the nature of concepts relating to family members. The FP girls gave more responses to this topic than to any other topic, and the substantial majority of their responses were essentially negative, if not hostile, e.g., "dinks," "creeps," "clods," and "funky." These expressions may reflect some of the girls' reactions to parental discipline and control, reactions to value conflicts between the girls and their parents, etc. However, it is noteworthy that responses such as these occurred relatively infrequently among the FA girls. It is possible that the mothers of the FA girls were less restrictive and controlling than the parents of the FP girls. On the other hand, it is also likely that the FA girls may have been more inhibited about expressing hostility or other negative attitudes towards their family members, in that they were presumably living within a more tenuous family situation, and they may have already been affected by the trauma of a family breakup involving the death, divorce, or desertion of a parent.

In conclusion, the results of this investigation, especially the findings based on the slang association measure, are suggestive concerning some possible influences of father absence. They suggest that in ghetto environments, FA girls may be exposed to and cognitively oriented towards sexually provocative and promiscuous experiences at an early age. The results also suggest that the father, in the ghetto environment, may have an important role in the development of sex-related attitudes, values, and knowledge of young adolescent girls.

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APPENDIX

TABLE A

Response Frequencies* of Father Absent and Father Present Girls for Stimulus Topic: BOYS

Father Absent (N=42)		Father Present (N=53)	
Response	Percent	Response	Percent
Pimp	52	Fox	21
Stud	31	Cat	17
Fine	26	Dinks	17
Sucker	17	Cool	13
Stone Fox	14	Creep	11
S.O.B.	12	Fine	11
Bastard	12	Pimp	11
Fox	12	Sad	9
King	12	King	9
Sad	12	Crazy	8
Gig	10	Hippie	8
Baby	7	Dirty	6
Cool	7	Fucker	6
Dog	7	Sucker	6
Fucker	7	Stone Fox	6
Honey	7	Ugly	6
Sissy	7	S.O.B.	6

*Responses with frequencies below five (5) percent were not included in the table.

TABLE B

Response Frequencies* of Father Absent and Father Present Girls for Stimulus Topic: FAMILY MEMBERS

Father Absent (N=42)		Father Present (N=53)	
Response	Percent	Response	Percent
Slave	17	Dinks	32
Big Ethyl	10	Brats	24
Old Lady	10	Big Ethyl	24
Pigs	10	Clods	23
Sad	10	Creeps	21
Sucker	7	Funky	17
		Sad	13
		Sucker	11
		Bitch	11
		Old Man	11
		Old Lady	9
		Chump	9
		Dog	9
		Queer	8
		Hung	8
		Punks	8
		Brains	6
		Dum-dum	6
		Finks	6
		God	6
		Hang-around	6
		Mental	6
		Pro	6
		Puppy face	6
		Ugly	6

*Responses with frequencies below five (5) percent were not included in the table.

TABLE C

Response Frequencies* of Father Absent and Father Present Girls for Stimulus Topic: SEX

Father Absent (N=42)		Father Present (N=53)	
Response	Percent	Response	Percent
Pro	57	Get down	11
Get down	52	Fucking	9
Fuck	40	Fuck	6
Whore	33	Pro	6
Hole	29	Whore	6
Pimp	29		
Stud	29		
JP	26		
Sock-it-to-me	26		
Homo	19		
Do-pussycat	17		
Fucker	14		
Virgin	14		
Pussy	12		
Sad	10		
Bitch	7		
Nasty	7		
Pussycat	7		

*Responses with frequencies below five (5) percent were not included in the table.